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## To Un-Become: Between Historic Reminder and Hallucination, Geographical Document and Childhood Memory, Collective Tragedy and Personal Healing

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To Un-Become:  
*Between Historic Reminder and Hallucination,  
Geographical Document and Childhood Memory,  
Collective Tragedy and Personal Healing*

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Photography by Vitalis Neufeld

*To Un-Become: Between Historic Reminder and Hallucination, Geographical Document and Childhood Memory, Collective Tragedy and Personal Healing is an multimedia art project, which explores the concept of un-becoming through revisiting Operation Storm in Yugoslavia and its consequences over two decades later. My interest in the concept of un-becoming was sparked by a court case in which General Ante Gotovina, a former Croatian military officer, was found guilty of organizing and implementing a permanent and forcible removal of the Serbian people in a 1995 military action entitled Operation Storm. Not long after, Gotovina's convictions for crimes against humanity were reversed by the Appeals Chamber of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. Gotovina then returned to Croatia where many considered him a national hero. Furthermore, the Appeals Chamber also disputed the existence of a criminal enterprise whose purpose was the permanent and forcible removal of Serb civilians entirely. I wonder if this allowed Gotovina to successfully un-become a criminal, and also ask whether the same un-becoming process is possible for the survivors of his actions? To research this question, in April 2017 I retraced the journey of over 650 km from my first refugee house in Niš, Serbia to my former home in Karlovac, Croatia. For over two weeks, dawn to dusk I walked following the same route hundreds of thousands of other people were forced to take two decades ago during Operation Storm. This experience merged the evidence of war with my own memories, both actual and constructed, creating a visual noise that became my truth during the walk.*

My mother found me in my bed, crying, with a pillow over my face, one year after we moved into our refugee apartment in Niš. She sat next to me, hugged me, and asked my why I was crying.

“I can’t tell you,” I replied.

I don’t remember exactly, but knowing my mother, she must have been crying together with me. When I finally had gathered my courage, with tears in my eyes, I said that I had lost something.

“What did you lose,” she asked.

“I can’t tell you,” I repeated.

“Can you at least tell me the first letter?”

“C,” I replied inaudibly.

“Second?”

“H.”

“Third?”

“I.”

Letter by letter, I sobbed the word “childhood.”

“It is still on the bench in front of our house.”

I was eight years old.





The Serbian Red Cross was helping refugees. Most often, help was in the form of non-perishable food. We received flour packed in sacks bigger than my seven-year-old body. The Red Cross office was downtown, and we had to take the bus to bring our flour home. The Red Cross symbol on the sack let other passengers know that we were refugees.

I was ashamed of it.

I was afraid of it.

Other children bullied me daily. They would tell me that I was Ustaša and that I should go back to where I came from. I did not know what it meant to be Ustaša. Adults used that word when spoke about the war, and that could not be good.

Ustaša was not good.

Ustaša was me.

A few months in a row, we only received flour. Our apartment was filled with it. There was so much flour, we spread it across the apartment by walking--by living. A white circle formed where my mother would bend over to scoop flour from the sack into a plastic bowl.

I found her there, once, in that circle, crying with a plastic bowl of flour in her arms.



For weeks we were hiding in an underground shelter. It was a dark, unfinished room, that I was afraid to enter. This is where my grandmother kept our winter food including her homemade šljiva (plum) jam. When she made it, she would give each kid a spoonful of boiling jam. It burned our tongues for days. We hid here with a neighboring Croatian family during the siege of Karlovac.

Karlovac was unclaimed.

Serbian or Croatian soldiers could take over the city and enter our shelter at any time. My father and our Croatian neighbor came up with a plan. I remember hearing them talking. If Croatian soldiers came in, our neighbor would speak up and claim we are all one Croatian family. If Serbian soldiers were to come in, my dad would do the same.

I sat in the dark thinking about my grandmother's jam and how šljiva sounds the same in both Croatian and Serbian.



Saša Rajšić is an artist and founder of the To Un-Become project. The project began as one-time performance and since then has evolved into a multimedia art project with contributions from artists from Germany and Serbia. Rajšić was born in Karlovac, Croatia, and like thousands of fellow Croatian Serbs, fled his country due to a threat of ethnic cleansing in the early nineties. He lived as a refugee in Serbia before immigrating to Canada in 2005. Rajšić earned his BFA from OCAD University in 2011. He received the Mudge Massey Traveling Award that enabled him to enroll in MA studies at the University of the Arts Helsinki, the Jacques Dagenais Science in Culture Award in 2010, and Performance Studies International Enrichment Award in 2012. Recently, he presented his work at the Annual Meeting on Law and Society in Toronto and the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration in Thessaloniki, both in 2018. Rajšić is a member of Displaced Peoples, a collaborative research network of the Law and Society Association. His work has been exhibited in Scotland, Italy, Sweden, Finland, Serbia, Germany, Greece, Palestine, UK, USA, and Canada, where he currently lives and works. Contact: [sasa@sasarajsic.com](mailto:sasa@sasarajsic.com).